

Perspective Digest

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A Pre-eminent Prayer Warrior (Let's Face It)

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A Pre-eminent Prayer Warrior

For those wishing to contemplate prayer, models are not scarce in Scripture. In the New Testament one finds the prayers of Christ and Paul, among others (we'll consider these in future columns). And of course there is the Old Testament Book of Psalms (which we'll listen to next time). First, however, we'll observe one of the prayer giants of the Bible—a woman. Indeed, not only the first woman, but the *only* woman in the entire Bible to utter a formal, spoken prayer and have her prayer quoted for us to read!

Customarily, we pass over the lengthy narrative of this mother to concentrate on the life of her noble son. But this time, we'll defy the customary and devote this column to her. And we shall find her to be a pre-eminent “prayer warrior.”

Her name: Hannah. In the pivotal shift from the Judges into the Monarchy of Israel, Hannah is the transitional person within the his-

torical narratives. The Samuel books commence with an extended account of her. Trevor Dennis alerts the sensitive reader to her seminal role:

“The Books of Samuel are primarily concerned with. . . just one man. . . David, for Samuel comes to prepare the way for him, while the account of the reign of Saul very soon becomes the story of David's own rise to power. . . . Hannah appears right at the start of it all, when David is but a twinkle in the narrator's eye. Her story provides the beginning of this great chapter in Israel's story, just as Eve's began the whole work, and Shiphrah and Puah and the women of Exodus 2 presided over the accounts of Israel's beginnings as a people in Egypt. . . . They, the women of the beginning of Exo-

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dus, helped set in train a series of events that would eventually take Israel out of Egypt, to their encounter with God at Sinai, and then on into the Promised Land. Hannah begins a tale that will lead Israel into the ambiguities of monarchy, into the division of the tribes into the kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and, in the end, to the catastrophes of invasions by Assyria and Babylon.”¹

Carefully notice the details of her life that the narrator selectively includes in 1 Samuel 1. After a description of her household, we see Hannah at the Temple praying. Her prayer is her first recorded speech. However, after this she speaks more than anyone else. But we must pause over this initial petition where she “was in bitterness of soul, and . . . wept in anguish” (1 Sam. 1:10, NKJV).² Included in her agonizing cries is a promise to dedicate the promised child as a Nazirite, a pledge men and women normally took for themselves. On other occasions, *God* declares that the child will be a Nazirite (Judges 13:4, 7). However, on this occasion, Hannah takes the initiative. As Dennis points out, “What God commands in Judges 13, she herself vows at Shiloh.”³

Moreover, the sensitive reader will notice that Hannah does not need Elkanah to pray for her. *She* prays. And her prayer becomes the first by a woman recorded for us to read. Dennis observes: “Eve, Sarah,

and Hagar converse with God, and Rebekah (Gen. 25:22) ‘enquires’ of him; Miriam, Deborah, and Mary the mother of Jesus all sing songs to God (Hannah herself will have her own songs to sing to him [1 Sam. 2]).” But, “in the narratives of the Old and New Testaments Hannah’s prayer is unique—no other woman pays God such a vow as hers.”⁴

Only later when her son is weaned do we learn of Hannah’s earlier vow regarding him. As the text suggests: “Mannah has not asked Elkanah to confirm her vow. . . . She presents her plan to dedicate Samuel as something already decided upon” (1 Sam. 1:22).⁵ Elkanah is not asked for his permission. He is depicted merely giving his blessing.⁶ After this he will have only one brief final appearance (with Hannah, 2:20). Henceforth, “he will have nothing to say, and nothing to do (he does not take any action in 2:20). Except for a few words of blessing from Eli in 2:20, all speech in the rest of Hannah’s story will be put in her mouth, all the initiatives taken will be hers, all that is done. . . will be done by her.”⁷

When Hannah subsequently brings Samuel to Shiloh in fulfillment of her vow to God, again the narrator focuses solely on her. She travels with her husband⁸ but all their worship experiences are initiated by Hannah.⁹ This information is significant, for Elkanah was a

Levite (1 Chron. 6:33-38). However, as Dennis points out, Hannah went to Shiloh “expressly to perform her own vow. It is she who has come with such fine offerings for sacrifice, and, remarkably, with her own child to dedicate to the service of God. When Mary presents Jesus to God in the temple in Jerusalem, she takes him home with her after the ceremony. Hannah will return to Ramah without Samuel”¹⁰—an offering without parallel in Scripture.

“It is hard to respond adequately to such an act as Hannah’s, and Eli does not try. This time he doesn’t answer her. Only Hannah herself can speak to what she has done. . . . For the second time she pours out her soul to God.”¹¹

This second prayer of Hannah’s is arresting. One does not hear gentle words as typically attributed to mothers. Instead we find “a vigorous shout of triumph. . . . There is nothing ladylike about it! Instead. . . it uses the imagery of war. It speaks of the shattering enemies, and closes with a prayer for the king. That final reference is significant, of course. In Hannah’s day there was no monarchy. . . . [yet] Hannah sings a *king’s song*!”¹²

One can’t help but be impressed with the strength of Hannah’s devotion to God. But it’s her praying that grips me just now. Let’s face it, how many of us have prayed in a manner that would constrain the profes-

sional clergy to chide us for being drunk! What kind of praying is this? Denise Carmody comments:

“Hannah’s prayer goes right to God, pouring out her grief, even her bile. She does not think of prayer as a tidy exchange or a proper little colloquy between herself, a genteel lady, and God. . . . If she aches, she cries out painful words. If she is angry, her emotions boil over. For, her God is her life, her vitality. . . . Biblical prayer regularly has an agency, a high quotient of emotion, that separates it from our present-day approaches to God.

“Hannah gives God her need and dereliction. She is at the end of her rope and has nowhere else to go. The fact that later, in the happy aftermath, she also goes to God, this time to praise, shows that her God is not merely a plugger of gaps, a last resort never visited until crisis hour. But she does not blush to beg God for help. If asked how she could humiliate herself to carry on like a drunken woman, she would have been amazed: where else ought a person in extremis to go?”¹³

These two prayers of Hannah are brimming with valuable instruction. Hannah’s first prayer in extreme suffering heartens us that God is not afraid of our negative emotions, and that we don’t need to “buck up” before we come to Him. In fact, after examining many biblical prayers, I’ve concluded that what God appre-

ciates most in our praying is *honesty*. He already knows what is in our most secret thoughts anyway, and He must be gratified when we genuinely face up to ourselves. We'll see much more of this in the Psalms.

Hannah's second prayer reminds us of the attitude of thanksgiving. In fact, it is one of the rare prayers in Scripture that doesn't petition God. Instead, Hannah's profound faith comprehends that her experience is illustrative of God's sovereignty in the larger paradigm of human history, and she exalts in praise to this all-powerful God whom she knows personally.

What makes us shout for joy? This question is profoundly important in the late 20th century, when so many Christians are either bored or disappointed. Walker Percy is correct (about a prevailing attitude with many people, even some Christians): "The main emotion of the adult American who has had all the advantages of wealth, education, and culture is disappointment." Percy points out that modern work, family life and politics are often disillusioning. Then he turns to religion:

"The churches are disappointing, even for most believers. If Christ brings us new life, it is all the more remarkable that the church, the bearer of this good news, should be among the most dispirited institutions of the age."¹⁴

Why is this so? The life of Hannah

seems to provide some answers. For me, Hannah gives a vivid portrait of one who, even while struggling with difficult personal problems, and even thought the "church" at that time was not healthy, had a profound relationship with God. He was very real to her. And the narrator portrays her often in intense prayer. Could this be the answer to a lackluster Christian experience? □

REFERENCES

¹ Trevor Dennis, *Sarah Laughed: Women's Voices in the Old Testament* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon, 1994), pp. 115, 116.

² Bible texts in this article are taken from the New King James Version.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁶ "And Elkanah her husband said to her, 'Do what seems best to you; wait until you have weaned him. Only let the Lord establish His word.' So the woman stayed and nursed her son until she had weaned him" (1 Sam. 1:23).

⁷ Dennis, p. 130.

⁸ Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 571.

⁹ "Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with three bulls, one ephah of flour and a skin of wine, and brought him to the house of the Lord in Shiloh" (1 Sam. 1:24).

¹⁰ Dennis, p. 132.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 133.

¹³ Denise Lardner Carmody, *Biblical Woman: Contemporary Reflections on Scriptural Texts* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), p. 40.

¹⁴ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos. The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983), p. 178.